Commentary on Mohammed

Beth Innocenti

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Commentary on Dima Mohammed: “Argumentative Activity Types and the Account of the Empirical Aims of Argumentative Discourse”

BETH INNOCENTI MANOLESCU

Department of Communication Studies
University of Kansas
Bailey Hall, Room 102
1440 Jayhawk Blvd.
Lawrence, KS 66045
USA
bimanole@ku.edu

INTRODUCTION

In "Argumentative activity types and the account of the empirical aims of argumentative discourse" Mohammed takes up a significant issue in argumentation theory, namely how to enhance the explanatory power of our theories by systematically accounting for context. Here she focuses on the institutional context. I will first summarize Mohammed's findings and then take issue with several assumptions.

FINDINGS OF "ARGUMENTATIVE ACTIVITY TYPES"

I begin with Mohammed's analysis of Question Time since an important test of an argumentation theory is how well it explains actual, complex argumentation. In choosing to analyze a portion of Question Time Mohammed puts her discussion of "argumentative activity types" to the test since political discourse is complex. The stakes of political decisions and decision-making are high, so it is worth the attention Mohammed gives to it. Her main purpose is to show that it is possible and desirable to analyze argumentation in terms of not only dialectical aims (rationally resolving a difference of opinion) and rhetorical aims (getting one's own way (van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 2002)), but also institutional aims.

Mohammed describes Question Time in terms of a critical discussion. The first question, then, is what difference of opinion participants aim to resolve. Mohammed answers this question as she describes Question Time as "an argumentative activity type aimed at enabling the Members of Parliament to take a decision concerning the performance of the government" (p. 6). In describing the confrontation stage, she identifies the "disputed proposition" as "the government's performance is up to the standards" (p. 6). The audience who decides is the House of Commons. In describing the opening stage, she notes procedural rules and assignment of roles. The rules determine "the argumentative means allowed for the parties" (p. 7) in the argumentation stage. The concluding stage occurs after Question Time since "the decision about the proposition is usually taken later, in a vote in the Parliament about approving the government's policies, for example" (p. 7).

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Mohammed's discussion of *Question Time* illustrates that institutional rules enable and constrain an arguer's "strategic manoeuvring," defined as topic selection, audience adaptation, and stylistic presentation. One of the *Question Time* rules is that topics of questions must involve matters under the responsibility of the Prime Minister; in the excerpt Mohammed analyzes, the antagonist adheres to this rule in choosing the topic of British involvement in the war in Iraq. Another rule is that discourse directed to the prime minister must be in the form of a question; the antagonist adheres to this rule as well by asking a question. Within the constraints of these rules, the antagonist is able "to defend his point of view in an effective way, since he believes that the British involvement in the war is a disaster" (p. 9). She also concludes that the protagonist meets "his obligations in an opportune way within the constraints of Question Time" (p. 9).

**CRITIQUE OF "ARGUMENTATIVE ACTIVITY TYPES"

Mohammed has selected an interesting excerpt for analysis in part because at least on its face it involves paradigm cases of fallacies. The antagonist uses a loaded question as he asks: "Why is this Prime Minister, who was so cavalier in taking this country into Iraq, failing in his duty of care to these soldiers" (p. 8). The protagonist responds with a red herring, asserting a statement of denial and then praising the soldiers for doing "a magnificent" and "necessary" job; and sets up a straw man by criticizing those who "undermine the morale of our armed forces" by questioning whether the government is "deliberately" not giving troops equipment and care when injured (p. 8). From a pragma-dialectical perspective these strategies would be judged fallacious if they derailed the exchange from achieving the ideals of a critical discussion. Since Mohammed's purpose is to describe and analyze rather than evaluate, in what follows I will focus on assumptions involved in the analysis.

One assumption is that argumentation ought to be analyzed in terms of a critical discussion. Mohammed (following others) describes *Question Time* as a debate in which "Members of Parliament express and defend their opinions concerning the policies adopted by the government, implicitly, in the question-answer exchange" (p. 6). But the aim of a critical discussion by definition is the resolution of a difference of opinion. Granted this is a normative ideal, but it does not match the nature of *Question Time*. Members of Parliament do not really intend to resolve their differences of opinion. Their efforts culminate in a vote--not resolution. Nor is unanimous resolution desirable in democratic governance. So this version of the dialectical aims is incommensurate with this argumentation.

Let us turn to "rhetorical aims"--persuasion to one's own standpoint. It does not seem accurate to describe this as an aim of *Question Time* either. It is unlikely that Members of Parliament would change their positions on the role of Britain in the war in Iraq or other matters just as a result of *Question Time* since many or all had probably taken a public stance on the issue at earlier times. Publicly changing one's mind is not a simple matter for politicians--or arguers more generally.

An account of *Question Time* quoted by Mohammed suggests an ideal other than resolving a difference of opinion: *Question Time* is "'part of the way in which the government can be held to account'" (p. 6). How does the argumentation fare when viewed as a way of making the government take public responsibility for its positions?
Consider one of MacNeil's loaded questions: "Why is this Prime Minister, who was so cavalier in taking this country into Iraq, failing in his duty of care to these soldiers?" (p. 8). On one hand, the institutional rules demand that the Prime Minister answer the question. On the other hand, MacNeil's loaded question pressures Blair to defend his position and in doing so holds him responsible for it. How? MacNeil prefaced the question with statements that members "have heard" about poor medical treatment, lack of body armor, and so on. Thus MacNeil manifests that his accusation is responsibly formed and holds others responsible for the evidence they have heard. Blair has an opportunity to manifest the rationality of his position—to point to facts that demonstrate care toward the soldiers. In other answers during this session Blair points to facts to counter criticism of his policies. In this instance, however, Blair simply asserts that he "simply dispute[s] that we are failing in our duty of care towards our soldiers" (p. 8) and presents a red herring and straw man. Thus MacNeil's strategy succeeds in making Blair and his government publicly take responsibility for the position. He compels Blair to argue, probably believing Blair cannot make a good one; and Blair does not make a good one. Thus MacNeil uses strategies that continue to hold Blair and the government accountable for the unpreparedness of British troops in the war in Iraq.

Now, I have taken this alternative purpose from a quotation of another source in Mohammed's paper. Perhaps it would be possible to find the Prime Minister or Members of Parliament reflecting upon their purposes in the course of Question Time. We do see this kind of reflection in deliberations in the United States Congress as members of Congress say they argue not to resolve a difference of opinion or make up their minds, but to justify how they plan to vote (Goodwin 1999, 2002; U. S. Congress 1918, pp. 768, 778, 783, 804).

CONCLUSION

Mohammed attends to an actual case of complex argumentation and the actual terrain that real arguers must negotiate—opportunities and constraints derived from institutional rules. I have argued that the pragma-dialectical ideal may not be a fair measure of what is taking place in this case of political discourse and at least some other cases of political deliberation by elites, because the discourse is oriented toward ideals other than the resolution of a difference of opinion.

link to reply

REFERENCES


United States Congress (1918, January 10). Congressional Record (Vol. 56, part 1).